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One Belt, One Road initiative and China-Russia relations – deep partnership or tactical alliance?

Abstract

The article looks at the initiatives in the OBOR framework, but also more broadly into the relationship between Russia and China and the identities of both states. The immediate factors encourage the present state of friendly rapprochement. At the same time, there is something missing for the deeper relationship, which could last. OBOR is declaratively endorsed by Russia, but it is also seen as a competitive project for influence in the region, especially in Central Asia. The article looks into similarities in Russian and Chinese values, such as securitisation of democracy and juxtaposition to the West, but also brings up the differences such as the attitudes to religion, work ethics, tactics in foreign policy. The conclusion is that China and Russia are rather competitors in the region than stategic allies.

Keywords: China, Russia, identities, values, competition

One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) is called the project of the century by Chinese authorities, and it is endorsed and looked upon with enthusiasm regionally, including by Russia. The last official two-day visit of President Putin to China took place on 14 May, 2017. He participated in the Summit of twenty-nine heads of states and governments of the "One Belt – One Road" initiative (lenta.ru, 2017). During the visit, among other things, the Russian side proposed the initiative of "Energy Ring" uniting Russia, South-Korea, Japan and China (Latuhhina 2017). The economic cooperation is thriving, and the plans of energy cooperation are in full swing.

After describing the cooperation in the framework of OBOR, this article will look more deeply into the relationship between Russia and China concentrating on the identities of both states. I analyse the immediate factors in the relationship, which encourage the present state of friendly rapprochement. At the same time, I argue that there is something missing for the deeper, more strategic relationship, which could last. OBOR is declaratively endorsed by Russia, but on a more deeper level, it is seen as a competitive project for influence in the region, especially in Central Asia.

The positive relationship between Russia and China can be illustrated by several important agreements. The 2014 Strategic Partnership, ratified shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, is widely regarded as the most enhanced in terms of depth and breadth of economic, political and security relations of any one of China's or Russia's network of partnerships. One of the most publicized and high-profile deals connected to this project is 40-year gas supply agreement between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) (Savic 2017). The important declaration was also signed in order to integrate Eurasian Economic Union with OBOR. It is

not a merger, but a linking up. The first avenue of this initiative involves finding and identifying investment projects, particularly logistics and infrastructure projects that would increase connectivity. The second avenue involves increasing trade by establishing a free trade zone or an economic partnership that would enable and facilitate trade. This partnership would concentrate on trade-facilitation measures, such as investment protection, removing red tape on customs, and merging different standards on intellectual property, customs and other areas (Shtraks 2016).

One can argue that China needs Russia on the side of OBOR mainly for political reasons. OBOR would create an infrastructure in many nations that were previously under Moscow's influence. In this respect, the goodwill of Russia is much welcome. For China, OBOR is much about symbolism, the project that would prove the Chinese people that China is a world leader able to summon to Beijing diplomats and prime ministers to pay tribute. Many suspect that for Russia it is mainly about money and infrastructure investment. First, Russia wants some new funds for infrastructure, Secondly, it wants to bring new energy to the Eurasian Economic Union, and thirdly, it would like to compensate for the vanished agenda of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) (Devonshire-Ellis 2017).

We could go on describing the economic projects planned between China and Russia, but my idea is to look behind the declarations, and see, if this partnership is based on deep understanding or is more of a declarative kind. First of all, let us see the similarities in terms of rhetoric of two states.

Similarities in values, securitization of democracy

I consider political discourse an important element of international relations, as the constructivist perspective allows us to see deeper identity politics trends. Russia's foreign policy is largely continuous, building upon the so-called principle of multilateral world order with Russia being as an important pole and strategically great power. Russia also emphasises the principle of respecting international law, by which, among other things, the sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs are meant. Foreign Policy concept of the Russian Federation of 2016 dedicates the paragraph to the relations with China, stating that "Russia view common principle approaches adopted by the two countries to addressing the key issues on the global agenda as one of the core elements of regional and global security" (Foreign Policy Concept 2016). Among common challenges, so-called new challenges and threats are mentioned.

Chinese foreign policy can be characterised by continuity as well. For the last sixty years the so-called "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" have been underpinning the policy. These are 1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; 2) mutual non-aggression; 3) mutual no-interference in each other's internal affairs; 4) equality and mutual benefit; and 5) peaceful coexistence. The foreign policy objectives are officially domestic political stability; sovereign security, territorial integrity and national unification and China's sustainable economic and social development (Carlsson, Oxenstierna and Weissmann 2015). Among other Xi's time initiatives on foreign policy, the authors cite the "One Belt, One Road" project. Some commentators note that it is used to balance Russia's influence in Central Asia. The strategic

value though of this project is the promotion of the "China model" and see it assimilated by neighbouring economic entities (Shen, 2016).

Both countries also understood well the importance of "soft power", the concept of Joseph Nye. It is interesting that both China and Russia see this concept more as one of the non-military ways of gaining more influence abroad, not as the power of attraction in the Western sense of this term. "Soft power" in the West is a useful but somewhat contentious term, may be broadly understood to mean the use of a range of tools, including non-governmental ones, to co-opt – rather than coerce – others to achieve desired goals. The Russian understanding of the term is more in the context of an information campaign: the Concept on foreign policy, for example, refers to the "illegal" use of soft power to pressure sovereign states, intervene in their internal affairs and destabilize them by manipulating public opinion. Russia's "soft power" is understood as a means of promoting Russian culture and language and countering "soft" attacks on the country (Monaghan 2013).

Chinese approach to soft power was most clearly identified in 2007, in a political report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, it began to articulate the theoretical basis for soft power, based on a combination of modern Marxist and ancient Confucian thought. The principles though developed very much in opposition to the Western and first of all American values of democracy, human rights and freedom of speech. The values of Confucianism include loving others, devotion to parents and siblings, harmony in thought and conduct. There is more debate about what constitutes the socialist values system, according to Hu Jintao these can be prosperity, democracy, harmony as important to nation-building, civilization, freedom, equality, justice,

rule of law, as important for the construction of an ideal society, patriotism, respect for work, faith, and friendship (Sayama 2016). The actual exploitation of the soft power can be seen in the network of Confucius Institutes. There are now thousands of institutes in more than 100 countries around the World. Their aim is to promote culture and language studies abroad, but the West often criticizes these institutions for supressing discussions on current political issues. In public diplomacy, China addresses not only wide audience, but more specifically the Chinese diaspora. In particular, China is keen that its message on key issues such as Taiwan and historical relations with Japan are shared by those in the diaspora (Sayama 2016). The second goal is to build a positive image of China among Western publics, especially through the media, such as CCTV, which started broadcasting from Washington and Nairobi (Sayama 2016).

In Russia, the promotion of one's values has taken quite a similar trajectory. The "Russian World" concept promotes Russia as a unique civilisation. This approach stemmed from two main directions: the Russian Orthodox church and the neo-eurasianists. But by 2008, the state has taken on the same notion, which can be also called Putin's conservative agenda. Although the geography of Russia as a civilization remains imprecise, the contents of this civilization are clearly rooted in conservative values. The frequency of the term "morality" (*нравственность*) and of the adjective "spiritual" (*духовный*) in Putin's speeches has increased in recent years, especially since his return to the presidency in 2012. The Kremlin understands morality as respect for "traditional" values: the heterosexual family (non-recognition of LGBTI rights); an emphasis on having children as a basis for individual life but also for the country's demographic health; the fight against

alcoholism; and respect for the elderly and for hierarchy (Laruelle 2015).

Russian idea of the "Russian World" is leaving unclear where the borders of this imaginary Russia stop, the definition of "compatriots" abroad is also left quite blurred. The notion of protection Russians abroad though takes a central stage in Russian foreign policy. The existence of the "diaspora" made it possible for Russia to feel like a great power and justify the possibility to act outside the Russian borders on the pretext of protecting Russians abroad. It also justified the leading role of Russia in the post-Soviet space and added to Russia's seeing itself as "a great power. Neil Melvin argues that the topic of settler communities, of Russian diaspora, became central in defining the new Russian national identity. As a result of internal political battle the two notions of ethnic (*русский*) and civic (*российский*) were merged together in a highly ambiguous relationship. The notion of Russian diaspora thus supported the myth of Russia as a homeland, as a great power. Russia reinvented itself as a kin-state, a homeland, as a powerful protector (Melvin 1995).

The main common feature of both states' political discourses is the juxtaposition of their values and civilizations to the West. It is deeply enrooted in both countries' understanding that their civilizations are unique, ancient and, most importantly, different from the West. The West is the "Significant Other", which helps to provide for the national identity. There are some common features of these "anti-Western" values, for example, collectivism, the respect for traditional family and the respect for hierarchy.

It is allegedly Vladimir Putin who advised former President Hu to be careful about so-called colour revolutions and NGO activities. The crackdown on civil freedoms in China

intensified especially after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 The four draconian laws were passed or in draft during 2015, which have given state authorities virtually unlimited powers to detain, arrest, and imprison citizens who are deemed to be threats to the state (Shambaugh 2016). The similar processes have been going on in Russia since Vladimir Putin consolidated his power.

This process can be analysed as "the securitization of democracy". I use the term "securitization" in the meaning of Copenhagen School of security studies. Securitization is thus the utmost phase of politization, bringing a certain issue high on the security agenda, justifying thus the extraordinary measures to fight against the alleged threat. Such a threat is so obvious and clear according to the official discourse that no discussion in the society is previewed. In this case the threats to identity are securitised i.e. "presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan, Waever and De Wilde 1998). This process is taking place in all societies notwithstanding if the regimes are democratic or autocratic, but, surely, in autocratic societies such as China and Russia, the discourse is generally much more influenced by the authorities. Both countries see pro-democracy movements as the main threat to the state. One can argue, if these states actually disregard the real threats to the societies (such as, for example, demographic situation in Russia or environment issues in China). The both regimes though mostly care about staying in power and thus the threats to the state seem to be the most important.

Differences in values, prejudices

As we looked in detail into the similarities between the authorities' declarations on values as opposed to the West, it is tempting to forecast that this common trend will lead to a deeper strategic relationship.

Let us analyse the differences now. In terms of propagated values, I see one of the main differences is the role of religion in society. As it is widely known, China has not practised an official monotheistic religion throughout history, its traditions stem from different sources, such as Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist philosophies. The Chinese people had their myths of creation, traditions of worshiping the dead, religious festivals and rituals. With the present Communist authorities, the official understanding is atheism, according to Marxist principles. The Chinese identity is very much based on the long history, the identity of the Han people as the descendants of the legendary Yellow Emperor, the continuity of the Chinese Empire through all dynastic changes and foreign rule; the uniqueness of the Chinese language and the Chinese thought (Meissner, 2006).

Russian history is different. The Orthodox religion stems from Byzantine Christian tradition, which followed the schism between two Christian churches. It also led to the messianic culture in Russia, as it was considered the Third Rome. The first Rome fell, the second one, Byzantium, fell as well, and Moscow is destined to continue the civilizationist role, spreading the true faith. The Orthodox faith was very much connected to the Russian Empire as a state in the past. After the October Revolution, Orthodox faith was officially abandoned, but Bolsheviks did not realise how deep the faith ran through the Russian identity. During the Second World War

(known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War) Stalin started to rehabilitate the church in order to unite the people. The church has not fully returned to the stage before 1991 though, but during recent years especially, it became very important part of the Russian authorities claim for legitimacy. Now one can speak about the amalgam of the state and the Russian Orthodox Church. The ethnic identity of contemporary Russians could be defined by term "*русскость*", understood as a feeling of belonging to the Russian nation and civilisation. *Русскость* is based on the Orthodox confession, the memory of the Russia's greatness, Russian language and culture, love of the Russian motherland and the bond between Russians in the area of the „Russian world", including not only citizens of the Russian Federation, but also Russians in the "near abroad" (Wierzbicki 2015).

One can claim that the Russian political discourse overemphasises the role of religion, and people actually do not practice the Orthodox faith that much. Still, one can see that the role of religion in China and Russia is perceived very differently by people. Thus, the World Value Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org) estimates that religion is very important (14,3%) or rather important (27,5%) for Russians, and the same numbers for Chinese are 2,6% (very important) and 8,0% (rather important).

The second important difference between Russian and Chinese identities is the work ethics, the term made famous by Max Weber, and overexploited since. Mas Weber emphasises the influence of Protestantism on the development of capitalism due to the work ethic. Some researchers though claim that the Confucian work ethic is not that far from the Protestant one. The Confucian work ethic consists of a belief in the value of hard work, loyalty to the organization, thrift,

dedication, social harmony, a love of education and wisdom, and a concern for social propriety. Both Confucian and Protestant ethics emphasise that employees can achieve the self-fulfilment through dedication and devotion to work. Both emphasise rather the achievements in this life than after-life (Rarick 2007). In Russia, Orthodox faith is proclaiming rather egalitarian approach, thus, the way you work is not influencing the salvation, which is different from Protestantism. Russian national character is not well adjusted to the market laws, it can be described by its lack of law-obedience. The Russian person is not used to put hard demands either on himself/herself or the others (Хвостов, Гаджимурадова, Афонасенко 2007). The Orthodox ethics is not encouraging people to the hard work and achieving success, but rather promotes poverty, spirituality, ascetics.

The two different identities have led for a long time towards many prejudices between the peoples who have been neighbours. One can state that the racial prejudice has been there . If the Chinese consider ethnic Han as the exceptional people with all the rest of the world purely tribute states or barbarians at the gates of the Middle Kingdom, then the Russians were partly influenced by the complex of superiority of the white race. The "Yellow Peril" danger was quite articulated already in the times of the Russian Empire.

One of the main threat discourses between Russia and China is connected to the racial prejudice in a way, and is connected to the perceived threat of Chinese migration to the Russian Far East. It is an emotional fear, as about 1,364 billion Chinese reside on 9,6 million square kilometres of land, and the 143,8 million of Russians are settled on 17,1 million square kilometres. Besides, it is actually very difficult for Russia to resist the economic might of China (Gulina 2015). If you

compare the adjacent areas near the border, the situation is even more drastic, it is about 4,3 million Russians in Amur oblast, Primorsky Krai, Jewish Autonomous Oblast and Khbarovsk Krai and around 109 million Chinese the provinces of Manchuria, Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning. The political discourse though overestimates the actual figures of the Chinese working and living in Russia, and alarmism is widely spread including on the highest level. So, as Putin himself visited the border town of Blagoveshchensk, he said that if the residents do nothing to turn the economic tide of the region, their children will speak Chinese (Tirnoveanu 2016).

Central Asia

The other discrepancy is the strategic competition in Central Asia, sometimes also called "The New Great Game", referring to the 19th century colonial powers competing for this region, mainly the British and the Russian Empires. Contrary to these times, the today competition is very much about economy, and especially rich energy resources. We can claim that China is stepping real steps with OBOR initiative, helping to build infrastructure in the region. For Russia, it is very much about discursive practices, claiming still that the region is the sphere of influence of Russia, having been part of the Russian Empire and later Soviet Union.

Russia has explicitly declared that Central Asia is inside its "sphere of legitimate interest" since Medvedev's speech of 2008. China is certainly a more subtle actor. China's policy is linked to domestic concerns, it is much more about ensuring stability and prosperity of the western province of Xinjiang. Central Asia is an important trade link to ensure access and opportunities for this region of China. While Russia wants to ensure

political loyalty, China strives more towards development good economic ties. China is currently investing in Central Asia at a rate that Russia knows it cannot compete with (Lain and Pantucci 2016). Starting in 2008, China displaced Russia as Central Asia's largest trading partner and became major lender and investor, especially in energy. Pipelines, roads and rails traversing the region – many built by China – now bring natural gas, uranium and other resources to the country, which increasingly relies on Central Asia as a trade route to the Middle East and Europe (Stratfor 2016).

Thus, we can see that in addition to a common securitization of the Western values and democracy, there is room for reciprocal securitization of each other as well. In the political discourse, it seems, it is mostly Russia that is threatened by China, and not the other way around. As I outlined, the main threats are demographic migration pressure in the Far East, and the economic predominance, including the regional influence in Central Asia.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the Russian policy is very much based on the rhetoric of dispersing the unique values and civilization around the world. Russia was also not hesitating in such matters as using military force abroad, annexation of Crimea, bringing instability in Eastern Ukraine. Russia complements this steps among other things by the doctrine of protecting compatriots abroad.

China, on the other hand, while also growing its international influence, has been much more cautious in sabre-rattling, and relied less on rhetoric, and more on economic cooperation. It is widely known that, for example, Chinese

policy in Africa, is based not on the promotion of ideology, but on the economic cooperation "without strings attached". It means that China sets no conditions on cooperation, being thus sometimes more attractive to the developing countries than the West, which sets strong conditionality. One can say that Russia is more vocal and aggressive, China is more quiet and pragmatic.

The differences of history and identity led to a different model of interaction with the world. In this article, I described both similarities and differences. It seems that the main common feature though for the time being is the juxtaposition to the West, which led to an alliance. Both countries are "not the West", but they are culturally very distinct from each other. Having a common adversary is not enough, and will result in rather tactical than strategic alliance. OBOR initiative is one of the examples of attempts to have more influence on the world affairs, and in a sense is cherished by both China and Russia authorities. At the same time, the players in this field are not equal. For China, Russia is a political partner, the entente with whom should facilitate the projects in the framework of OBOR, especially in Central Asia. For Russia, it is an opportunity not to miss out on something going on in its neighbourhood. On a deeper level, the two states are rather competitors than partners.

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